METHOD FOR PAYING INVOICES

TECHNICAL FIELD

[0001] The present invention relates to a system and method of permitting a customer to pay an invoice, such as a utility invoice, at a retail outlet, such as a grocery store.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

[0002] Meyer et al., U.S. Patent Application Publication No. 2002/0128967 discloses a system where a customer pays an invoice issued by a biller, such as a utility company, at a retail location, such as a supermarket. However, this system requires that the utility's invoice includes a bar code identifying both the utility as well as the customer.

[0003] Additionally, this system requires extensive integration with the supermarket's cash register system.

[0004] Further, this system requires that the supermarket forward the payment through the Federal Reserve Automated Clearing House (ACH) Network.

[0005] Still further, this system makes no provision for charging the consumer for this service.

[0006] The present invention is provided to solve these and other problems.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0007] Other advantages and aspects of the present invention will become apparent upon reading the following description of the drawings and detailed description of the invention.

[0008] Figure 1 is a block diagram of the present invention.

[0009] Figure 2 is a process flow diagram of one aspect of the present invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

[0010] While this invention is susceptible of embodiment in many different forms, there is shown in the drawings and will herein be described in detail preferred embodiments of the invention with the understanding that the present disclosure is to be considered as an exemplification of the principles of the invention and is not intended to limit the broad aspect of the invention to the embodiments illustrated.

[0011] A system 10 for permitting a customer billee, such as an individual, to pay an invoice 12 generated by a biller 14, such as from a utility company, at a retail outlet of an organization, such as a retail grocery store of a grocery store chain, is illustrated in Figure 1.

[0012] The grocery store chain has a central station 15, such as its headquarters, and a plurality of distributed outlets 16. Each of the outlets 16 typically has a plurality of cashier's terminals 18. Each of the cashier's terminals 18 is coupled to a conventional point-of-sale (POS) controller 20, which is part of the store's computer system.

[0013] The invoice 12 is issued to the customer, either by regular mail, by e-mail, or otherwise. The customer goes to the outlet 16, possibly selects various items to purchase, such as groceries, and takes the selected items, if any, and the invoice to the cashier's terminal 18.

[0014] An invoice transaction is conducted by a cashier entering data identifying the biller and the billee into the cashier's terminal 18. Specifically, the biller may be identified by entering a Product Look-Up Code (PLC) for the biller. Alternatively, the biller may be identified by scanning a bar-code identification of the biller, which bar-code could be printed on the invoice. The customer is identified by entering a customer code identifier, such as the customer's account number. This may be done either by manually entering the account number via a key pad, or by scanning a bar code on the invoice.

[0015] The cashier also enters data indicating an amount of money to be paid by the billee towards the invoice into the cashier's terminal. The billee may choose to pay some or all of the invoiced amount. This may be repeated for other invoices, as well.

[0016] If the billee also desires to purchase one or more other items from the outlet 16, an other transaction is conducted by the cashier entering data identifying the one or more other items to be purchased into the cashier's terminal 18.

[0017] The POS controller 20 determines a total amount of money due as a result of the invoice transaction and the other transaction, and the billee tenders payment for the amount due. The POS controller 20 creates an electronic transaction log including an invoice transaction record of the invoice transaction and, if one or more other items were purchased, an other transaction record of the one or more other items purchased. The POS controller 20 flags the invoice transaction record, and transmits the transaction log from the POS controller 20 to a processing server 26.

[0018] The processing server 26 strips the invoice transaction record from the transmitted transaction log, and transmits the stripped invoice transaction record from the processing server 26 to a central server 30. The central server 30 performs both a communication function as well as a payment processing function. The central server may include a single server 36 to perform these functions, or it may include one or more dedicated communication server(s) and one or more dedicated payment processing server(s). The payment processing function gathers multiple stripped invoice transaction records, relating to multiple invoice payments, to multiple billers, over a period of time. Peridically, the central server 30 determines from the transmitted, stripped invoice transaction records, the amount of payment due to each of the particular billers, and the central server 30 electronically instructs the central station 15 to forward payment to the appropriate

biller. Payment by the central station 15 to the particular billers can be done, as desired, such as by check, by wire, or otherwise.

[0019] The central server 30 also generates an electronic notification to each of the billers, indicating the amount paid by the respective billees towards their respective invoices.

[0020] The transaction log may include a plurality of transaction records, with each of the transaction records having a respective invoice transaction record and other transaction record.

[0021] In the preferred embodiment, the processing server 26 and the central server 30 are operated by a third-party. Accordingly, a service fee is added to the amount the customer wants to pay to the biller, and thus this amount is added to the total amount of money the customer tenders to the cashier. This service fee is split between the grocery chain and the third-party. To transfer the third-party's share from the grocery, which received the service fee from the customer, to the third-party, the central server 30 electronically instructs the central station 15 to pay the third-party its share. This payment can be done by check, by wire, or otherwise.

[0022] The transaction log is transmitted to the processing server on a daily basis, such as following the normal end-of-day (EOD) run.

[0023] The stripped invoice transaction record is transmitted to the central server 30 when the invoice transaction record has been stripped from the transaction log.

[0024] The stripped invoice transaction record is transmitted from the processing server 26 to the central server 30 by a direct modem connection. Alternatively, the stripped invoice transaction record is transmitted from the processing server 26 to the central server 30 by an internet connection.

[0025] In the preferred embodiment, each of the outlets 16 has a plurality of cashier's terminals 18 coupled to a respective POS controller 20.

[0026] Following the transaction, the cashier's terminal generates a receipt for the customer, identifying both payment of the utility invoice, as well as payment for the other items, if any, purchased.

[0027] The present invention can be accomplished with no intrusion into the outlet's existing computer system, other than a minor modification of the software in the POS controller 20. These modifications will now be described with reference to Figure 2.

[0028] A first modification is identified as User Exit Program 1. According to this modification, the POS controller software is modified to receive the PLU code of the biller issuing the invoice to be paid, and to determine the identity of the biller. If the POS controller does not recognize the PLU code, an error message is generated. Otherwise, the POS controller receives the data identifying the customer. The POS controller then receives data identifying the amount to be paid towards the invoice, and then adds the service fee.

[0029] A second modification is identified as User Exit Program 2. According to this modification, once the utility transaction item has been added, the POS controller flags the utility transaction in the transaction log.

[0030] A third modification is identified as User Exit Program 3. According to this modification, information regarding the utility payment is added to the otherwise conventional receipt.

[0031] A fourth modification is identified as User Exit Program 4. According to this modification, the POS controller transmits the transaction log to the processing server when the conventional EOD routine is run.

[0032] In an alternative embodiment, the POS controller 20 can be modified to transmit to the processing server 26 only those transaction logs including an invoice transaction record.

[0033] In a further alternative embodiment, the POS controller 20 can be modified to transmit to the processing server 26 only the invoice transaction record.

[0034] In a still further alternative embodiment, the processing server 26 and the central server 30 can be eliminated, and the POS controller 20 is modified to directly instruct the central station 15 to pay the biller.

[0035] While the specific embodiments have been illustrated and described, numerous modifications come to mind without markedly departing from the spirit of the invention. The scope of protection is only intended to be limited by the scope of the accompanying claims.